

Does the Middle East Still Matter? The Obama Doctrine and U.S. Policy

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Four eminent scholars and policy practitioners debate the president's worldview and how it will shape American interests and options in the next administration.

On March 12, Derek Chollet, Ellen Laipson, Michael Doran, and Michael Mandelbaum addressed a Washington Institute Policy Forum inspired by the controversial Atlantic cover story "[The Obama Doctrine](#)." Chollet is the counselor and senior advisor for security and defense policy at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. Laipson is a distinguished fellow and president emeritus at the Stimson Center. Doran is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. Mandelbaum is the Christian A. Herter Professor of American Foreign Policy at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks, not a verbatim transcript.

DEREK CHOLLET

Since his first presidential campaign, Barack Obama has sought to redefine American strength and rebalance the U.S. leadership role in world affairs. He does not think doctrinally, instead seeing global challenges in more particular ways that are best addressed with a long-term approach.

When he assumed office, Obama believed that U.S. policy was imbalanced, and he sought to restore balance on several fronts: between priorities in different regions, between domestic and international priorities, within various U.S. partnerships, and in the application of different tools of statecraft. His conception of strategic balance recognizes the limits of U.S. power and resources. While this view may be politically incorrect, grand strategy mandates the identification of priorities and corresponding resource allocation. This process is complicated by the fact that the United States faces more demands than any other nation, but America cannot do it all.

Obama views sustainability as critical to any policy, so he has aimed to develop sustainable commitments in the Middle East that are balanced with other interests. He views U.S. leadership and its capacity to set global agendas -- either from the front or behind the scenes -- as key to any sustainable, balanced policy. In some areas, such as Latin America and Southeast Asia, this approach has improved relations remarkably. The one area where things are not appreciably better is the Middle East. Yet restraint is critical to achieving balance and sustainability, and while certain actions or rhetoric might be politically expedient, the president is wary of anything that might throw America's overall foreign policy off balance.

Accordingly, Obama's record shows a preference for the more precise and discreet instruments of American power, such as drone strikes, special operations, and targeted sanctions. Precision provides maneuverability and flexibility, but patience is required for his signature initiatives, including efforts to address Iran, the Islamic State,

and climate change. On some policies, however, it is fair to ask whether the United States has enough time to be patient.

Obama also recognizes that part of America's greatness derives from its ability to acknowledge its fallibility and correct course when necessary. He is skeptical of those who offer quick answers and easy justifications, and he is wary of political debates in Washington undermining strategic thinking. His optimistic long-game approach runs counter to political trends at home, but he believes it is the best way of enabling American exceptionalism abroad.

Despite the administration's rebalancing efforts, developments under his watch do not support the argument that the United States is pivoting away from the Middle East. There are more forces deployed in the region today than before 9/11. The U.S. military is working to strengthen its Gulf partners, and the past seven years have seen some of the largest arms sales in history. Similarly, Washington has maintained its support to Egypt in the face of criticism at home, while military and intelligence support for Israel is at record levels. Obama was also able to eliminate the vast majority of Syria's chemical weapons without the use of military force.

Even so, the next administration will face a reassurance problem in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, where U.S. partners are deeply concerned about regional developments. They all want more from Washington, and they have maximalist ambitions for what the United States should be doing in the world.

ELLEN LAIPSON

Because President Obama has a cosmopolitan view of the world, he is highly empathetic toward how other countries experience American power. This mindset has led him to refine and advance a nuanced understanding of U.S. power in a globalized world.

Despite accusations that America is pulling back from the Middle East or pivoting to Asia, his 2009 Cairo speech demonstrated a significant ambition to transform U.S.-Arab relations. While some considered his reaction to the Arab Spring naive, he perceived an opportunity to change the social contract between Middle Eastern governments and their societies. More recently, though, he has referred to Arab states as "free riders," a view that is behind the times -- Arab leaders, particularly Saudis and other Gulf partners, have assumed more initiative and responsibility in the past few years.

At the same time, Obama believes that some of the region's problems are not amenable to American solutions -- certain existential issues can only be addressed by Middle Easterners themselves. This should not be misinterpreted as indifference or lack of commitment, but his administration does want the region to assume more responsibility for its problems. To be sure, the United States still maintains security partnerships in the region, but these relations are complicated -- they are not mutually binding defense agreements comparable to NATO or U.S. alliances in Asia.

In Syria, past deliberations about whether to use force in response to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons were shaped by the president's aversion to launching another military campaign in a Muslim country with no roadmap for the day after. This logic is viewed through a different lens today, however, and the decision to abstain from more forceful intervention in 2013 now appears to be a costly one.

More broadly, America's responsibilities in the Middle East transcend the declared interests of any individual states in the region. If overall stability is the primary objective, Washington should endeavor to improve relations between Arab states and Iran over the long term, though it might be counterproductive to place too much emphasis on such efforts at the moment.

Finally, the region's policy importance has been decreasing by a few degrees because of America's growing energy independence. In the future, Washington will probably accept greater risk in the Middle East and will be less likely to intervene.

MICHAEL DORAN

Obama is a strategic thinker, and much of his thought process in the Middle East has been informed by two assessments: that the region is not strategically vital to the United States, and that Israel's security is not a crucial concern. While previous presidents sought to elevate allies over adversaries, Obama envisions the adversaries -- principally Iran and Russia -- as legitimate regional stakeholders.

The Iran nuclear deal was part of an effort to work with these adversaries in order to stabilize the Middle East and decrease U.S. commitments in the region. The White House opted not to impose costs on Iran and Russia for their activities in Syria in no small part because of the priority it gave to the nuclear negotiations. Yet while the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action may prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon for ten to fifteen years, this is a temporary delay at best, and it will come at the cost of a regional nuclear arms race.

The 2013 "chemical redline" episode likewise reflected the administration's recognition of Iranian interests in Syria. Obama did not want to use force because he believed it would threaten progress with the Iranians; instead he wrote a letter to the Supreme Leader and withheld aid to Syrian opposition groups, which helped change the balance of power in favor of the Assad regime and Tehran.

The president's strategy is problematic because Russia and Iran actively undermine American interests and allies

in the Middle East. As a result, the region will not sufficiently stabilize for the United States to withdraw, and the U.S. alliance system will continue to weaken. In contrast, the Russian-Iranian alliance is growing stronger -- it represents the region's greatest transformation, and Washington is not devoting adequate resources to contain this threat.

Iran's expanding militia network is based on the Hezbollah model and provides a cheap way to undermine its adversaries. The Saudis, Turks, and Israelis do not have sufficient assets to combat this network individually, and their sundry divisions prevent them from jointly confronting the Russian-Iranian alliance. The United States is best positioned to coordinate missions and alliances in order to address this threat and arrange a stable regional order. Rebalancing requires strong allies, and the next president will need to strengthen U.S. ties in the region and reverse the idea that Washington cannot productively apply military force.

MICHAEL MANDELBAUM

For the United States, the Middle East is now relatively less important than it was between 1989 and 2014. During that post-Cold War period, Europe and East Asia were largely at peace, allowing Washington to allocate more resources and attention to the Middle East. Today, however, new strategic challenges are demanding attention in East Asia and Europe, and other parts of the globe will no doubt require a reallocation of resources in the future.

The United States has three principal concerns in the Middle East: preventing any single country from achieving hegemony, preventing nuclear proliferation, and maintaining global access to the region's oil. Although new technology has made America less reliant on Middle Eastern energy resources, Japan and Western Europe still depend on them, so preserving U.S. relationships with these close allies will likely require Washington to continue prioritizing the region's oil security. For its part, Israel still needs help in combatting proliferation among its neighbors.

While the Islamic State is the region's principal threat to individual Americans, Iran is the principal threat to America's interests and commitments in the Middle East. It is a revanchist state that seeks regional dominance and remains a proliferation concern. Accordingly, containing Iran should be Washington's primary objective in the region.

Even if the United States has no interest in the doctrinal basis of the region's sectarian conflicts, the fact is that most of its allies there are Sunni governments. Maintaining these alliances can be difficult because some Sunni partners are unable to field fighting armies or are otherwise reluctant to put boots on the ground, complicating the Obama administration's goal of confronting the Islamic State without significant U.S. ground intervention. Sunni states are especially unlikely to make such commitments when they distrust Washington's efforts to negotiate with Iran about its regional role. Russia's alignment with Tehran and the wider Shiite coalition further complicates any large-scale U.S. military intervention on the Sunni side. Another problem is that the Obama administration has no clear strategy for the day after the Islamic State is defeated, creating the risk that a new radical Islamist group will simply take its place.

Obama is sensitive to those who oppose U.S. power and less sensitive to those who depend on U.S. power. Yet credibility matters when confronting strategic adversaries. Nearly all of Obama's past political career took place in an era when the United States lacked strategic adversaries, and he has not adapted well to their reemergence in this new era.

This summary was prepared by Patrick Schmidt.